

Docket Item #5  
BAR CASE #2006-0092

BAR Meeting  
May 10, 2006

**ISSUE:** Permit to Demolish Charles Houston Recreation Center

**APPLICANT:** City of Alexandria Department of General Services

**LOCATION:** 901 Wythe Street

**ZONE:** POS/Open Space and Recreation

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**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** Staff recommends approval of the application as submitted.

(Insert Sketch here)

NOTE: This docket item requires a roll call vote.

**I. ISSUE:**

The applicant is requesting approval of a Permit to Demolish for the demolition of the existing Charles H. Houston Recreation Center in order to replace the facility with a new state-of-the art recreation center.

The one story masonry building is located near the center of the square bounded by Madison Street on the north, Wythe Street on the south, North Alfred Street on the east and North Patrick Street on the west.

An outdoor pool is located on the north side of the square, adjacent to Madison Street. A playground is located at the

southeast corner of the square, adjacent to Alfred and Wythe streets. A 45-space parking area is located at the southwest corner of the square, adjacent to Wythe and Patrick Streets. The low building has an irregular footprint. It is clad in brick and has red painted standing seam metal roofs with mansard-like forms along the Wythe Street, Alfred Street and Madison Street facades. The large gymnasium section is located in the center of the facility and has a flat roof. The main entrance is located near the center of the Wythe Street facade. The fenestration pattern is irregular, governed by the interior program. The windows are of a dark metal storefront system. The 21,760 gross square foot center houses a variety of uses, including: child care, senior services, gymnasium, weight room, game room, computer center, boxing facility and meeting areas.



**Figure 1 - Charles Houston Recreation Center**

**II. HISTORY:**

The site of the Charles H. Houston Recreation Center is significant in Alexandria's history as the home of the Parker-Gray School. The square bounded by Madison, Wythe, North Alfred, and North Patrick streets was part of the Henry Daingerfield estate in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *Hopkins Atlas* of 1877 shows that the main house and other outbuildings were generally located to the south of the subject square, which remained undeveloped. The use of the subject square over the next forty years is unknown. In 1920 the Parker-Gray Elementary School was constructed on the southern end of the square, facing Wythe Street.



**Figure 2 - Parker-Gray School**

The Parker-Gray Elementary School was constructed for the education of African American boys and girls, replacing the deteriorating and inadequate Hallowell (boys) and Snowden (girls) schoolhouses. The new building was named for John F. Parker and Sarah J. Gray, beloved teachers in those two schools. Initially, the school served grades one through eight. In 1932, Parker-Gray became Alexandria's first African American high school. Prior to this, African American students who wished to continue their education had to travel by bus to Washington, D.C., to attend either Dunbar High School or Armstrong High School. Parker-Gray's first four-year high school class graduated in 1936. Over time the Parker-Gray High School gained a reputation for its dedicated teaching staff who, despite the constraints of segregation, were able to provide a positive learning experience. Despite a series of additions in the intervening years, increased enrollment created a need for larger quarters for the high school by 1950. That year, the high school relocated to a new building at 1207 Madison Street. The high school retained the name, Parker-Gray. The old school on Wythe Street was then renamed Charles Houston Elementary School, in appreciation of the famous NAACP lawyer who wrote the brief that upheld the cause of integration in the Supreme Court. Integration of Alexandria's schools was achieved in 1964. During the desegregating years, Charles Houston Elementary School closed and it eventually burned.

The existing Charles Houston Recreation Center building was constructed in 1976. The well-known Alexandria firm, VVKR designed the facility in partnership with Turner Associates, a Washington, D.C. firm. The center was renovated in 1990 at which time a boxing area was added on the west side. These plans were prepared by Rust, Orling and Neale. Inadequate to present day needs, a 2005 study by Lukmire Partnership identified a desired program for a new or renovated facility at this site. Lukmire Partnership then investigated three options including one which would renovate and expand the existing facility and two for entirely new one-story facilities with differing footprints. On October 25, 2005, City Council determined that the project would be entirely new construction rather than a combination of renovation and new construction.

### **III. ANALYSIS:**

In considering a Permit to Demolish, the Board must consider the following criteria set forth in the Zoning Ordinance, §10-105(B):

- (1) Is the building or structure of such architectural or historical interest that its moving, removing, capsulating or razing would be to the detriment of the public interest?
- (2) Is the building or structure of such interest that it could be made into a historic shrine?
- (3) Is the building or structure of such old and unusual or uncommon design, texture and material that it could not be reproduced or be reproduced only with great difficulty?
- (4) Would retention of the building or structure help preserve and protect an historic place or area of historic interest in the city?
- (5) Would retention of the building or structure promote the general welfare by maintaining and increasing real estate values, generating business, creating new positions,

attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, attracting new residents, encouraging study and interest in American history, stimulating interest and study in architecture and design, educating citizens in American culture and heritage, and making the city a more attractive and desirable place in which to live?

In the opinion of Staff, the proposed demolition does not meet any of the above criteria. The building is only 30 years old. Thus, it falls outside the generally recognized period of significance for the Parker-Gray Historic District and would not be considered a contributing resource. It is a commonly accepted precept of historic preservation that buildings do not merit consideration for individual significance until at least 50 years have passed since the date of construction. However, it is recognized that some buildings are of such exceptional significance that they may be considered before the 50 years have elapsed. Staff is unaware of any area of historical or architectural significance for this building that would merit special consideration for individual significance. Architecturally it appears to be an unremarkable example of late 20<sup>th</sup> century institutional design. Constructed before the establishment of the Parker-Gray Historic District, the building was not designed in a particularly sympathetic manner to the surrounding historic neighborhood. In fact, its siting, at the center of the square with parking pushed to the edge at a prominent travel corridor, the existing building turns its back to the neighborhood. Its modern architectural design vocabulary does not make any attempt to relate to the largely late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> buildings of the historic district. While it has served an important neighborhood function for three decades, no events of significance are known to have occurred there. The new building will continue to serve the neighborhood, but undoubtedly in a more satisfactory fashion.

**IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends approval of the application as submitted.

CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F - finding

Code Enforcement:

C-1 Prior to the issuance of a demolition permit or land disturbance permit, a rodent abatement plan shall be submitted to Code Enforcement that will outline the steps that will taken to prevent the spread of rodents from the construction site to the surrounding community and sewers.

Historic Alexandria:

No comments.

Alexandria Archaeology:

- F-1 The G.M. Hopkins Insurance map from 1877 indicates that this property was part of a large estate owned by Henry Daingerfield. The main house and most of the other mapped structures were located on the block to the south. The 1850 tax records note that John Foster was probably the occupant of the house at the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the property was the site of one of the City's African American schools—Parker Gray. While it is likely that construction of the current structure on the property would have destroyed much of the evidence of earlier historic activities, there is a possibility that deep features may still be present.
- C-1 Call Alexandria Archaeology immediately (703-838-4399) if any buried structural remains (wall foundations, wells, privies, cisterns, etc.) or concentrations of artifacts are discovered during development. Work must cease in the area of the discovery until a City archaeologist comes to the site and records the finds.
- C-2 The above statement must appear in the General Notes of all site plans so that on-site contractors are aware of the requirement.